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Getting in touch

Poetic inquiry and the shift from measuring to sensing

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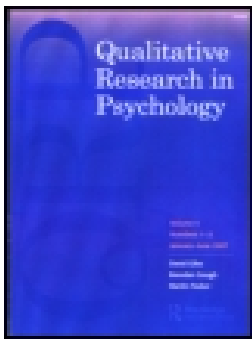
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Getting in touch: poetic inquiry and the shift from measuring to sensing

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I present a poetic collage, the methodological aim of which is to elevate the voices of young people at the margins of the educational system. By use of poetic inquiry, I construct analyses that condensate the subjective experiences of young people's interaction with political, structural, and institutional conditions. The focus in the article is, first, to show how poetic inquiry is valuable as a methodological tool to create analytical work that encourages reflection as well as sensing experiences of young participants. Second, the article includes also a brief introduction to working analytically with poetic inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Education; NEET; poetic inquiry; processes of becoming; young people

Elevating the voices of young people

This article addresses the need for qualitative research that offers more subtle understandings of young people at the margins of the educational system. There is a need for “methodological imagination” (Jacobsen, Drake & Petersen 2014), a need to shift from methods that measure toward methods that capture the subjective and affective aspects of human life (Richardson 1997, 1993). Poetic inquiry is the curious search for new horizons, from stepping out of the natural habitat to look for inspiration from other disciplines (Gergen & Gergen 2012; Jacobsen et al. 2014; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009). Literary and other artistic sources have become increasingly legitimate as inspiration for social research. Such sources entail switching from searching for interpretation and meaning toward an understanding of the layer of presence as a way of getting in touch with the world (Brinkmann 2014).

My research area focuses on the growing number of young people under the age of 30 who have not completed upper secondary education and are unable to find stable, lasting jobs. The work consists of various analyses of what I call the “mutual processessing” (Søndergaard 1996; Görlich 2016b) between the young people on the one hand and educational, institutional,

political, financial, and labour-related conditions on the other. Specifically, there is a focus on how education has become compulsory as a demand for unemployed young people who claim social benefit. I explore how this weaves into young people's processes of becoming (Davies 2006; Butler 1990).

The methodological aim of my use of poetic inquiry is to elevate the voices of the young. Hence, I focus on their subjective experiences, emotions, attempts at navigating, stories of defeat, collapse, victories, and hopes for the future. Through this, I construct analyses of the young people's processes of becoming, or subjectification, with terms borrowed from Judith Butler (1990) and Bronwyn Davies (2006). The analytical constructs build upon a relational optics, which entails a shift in focus from individual motifs, motivations, needs, etc. to relational and structural phenomena (Gergen 2009) and how these interweave with the young people's movements to, from, and between education, work, and activation schemes. The analyses are constructed by use of the method poetic inquiry, which I use to condensate the subjective experiences of political, structural, and institutional conditions and the young people's interaction with these (Görlich 2016a). By applying literary tools such as form, rhythm, repetition, pauses, and symbols to the empirical material, the researcher allows for an exploration of the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions in the young people's stories, which are then presented as poetic, emotionally evocative and polyvocal texts (Görlich 2016a). Hereby, the reader is offered the opportunity to simultaneously sense and understand the processes of becoming. Hence, the methodological approach enables the showing of phenomena that are sensed and felt in human relations.

Inquiring poetically into young people's processes of becoming

Here I present three years of my analytical work with poetic inquiry. I offer this as a poetic collage of sorts of various poetic analyses I have constructed during this work. After this, I will elaborate further on the empirical material and on working analytically with poetic inquiry.

a room full of noise
pale skin
pizza chocolate coke smoke
sleepless nights
soapless smell
intense pale
not enough sleep
not enough
sitting in corners

looking away
black sheep
black teeth
wrapped in coats and scarfs and music in ears
hiding behind fears and bags and mobile phones
some never say a word
others talk endlessly
intense pale distant quiet
noise
tables in line
six students
and one
he sits by himself
table for one
quiet talk mumbling
teacher says
“you don’t wanna join us?”
teacher leaves again
waits for no answer
he sits by himself
table for one
just don’t understand
I am seventeen
I am not cannot am not
never never
shut off
school, home work, sleep, school, home work, sleep,
what is right
what is it exactly
I have to do
have to
have to
is not freedom
I am now eighteen
I am
a loser a gutter a diagnosis
and bla bla bla
given up
have to
trying
not so serious
trying
let go a little

be here
I have to try
I am nineteen
I am
collapsed, run down, stressed, pressed
cannot live
in this world
not live
I am the one making mistakes
me doing it all wrong
I if cannot figure out how to be different
it is my own fault
don't fit into this world
it's my problem
not worthy
trying
to be free
taking
one step at a time
taking
it slow
'you're only twenty'
and
"I'd fucking like doing something"
one day at a time
my mother told me
be a teacher, my father a lawyer
it's just not me not me
I told them
carpenter
my mother sighed
my father was angry
said I deserved a slap
would of course like his children to be something big
he called me at school
every day, crying, screaming
shouldn't have this shit at school
made a decision
my mentor supports me
knows how I am
sees me see myself
see ahead think write
terrified to end up like him

have to find peace
in me
a head one step at a time
everybody looks down
social benefit
not welcome
a class of misfits
on the dole
send them out there
a class of misfits
then, they can bother each other
then, we don't hear from them
apart
from society
on the dole
I was told
either you turn up
or you're out
why not warn me
why say this now
why not in school
nine years
could've changed
if they had told me
how would I know
a child
a child knows shit
now this
you're not good enough
do something
now
right now
had a new case worker
fresh from the state
"now you need to start an education"
was the first thing she said
fresh from the state
my old case worker
was much more understanding
concerned
about me now
I am not smart enough
tried one education after the other

tried to find work
tried it all
and argued with my teacher
she told me to leave
so I left
and tried another education
it didn't work
tried again
and again
one day
I stopped trying
and broke down
then I went to the doctor
and tried depression
now I am here
trying

The empirical material and analytical voices

Working with poetic inquiry can be done in a variety of ways, and a range of terms exist that include performance poems, collective poems, autobiographical poems, found poetry, and transcript poems (Prendergast et al. 2009). I work with interview transcripts and field notes from ethnographic observations. My position is that poetic inquiry is more than just a representation of the participants' voices or an alternative way of presenting qualitative data. I consider poetic inquiry a methodological tool to construct evocative and polyvocal analyses, encouraging the reader to simultaneously reflect on and sense the young people's stories. Evocative, because they contain emotional responses of the young participants and evoke the reader/listener's emotional responses; polyvocal, because more voices weave into each other in the analysis. Inspired by Prendergast and colleagues (2009), the polyvocality consists of 1) *the participants' voices*, the words of the young participants; 2) *the researcher's voices*, my questions, my emotional and "embodied" (Davies 2000) presence, and my subjective choices in the process of condensation; 3) *the theory voices*, the theoretical concepts that inform the analytical questions used for constructing the poetic analyses; and 4) *the readers' voices*, which emerge when the reader/listener is affected emotionally (Richardson 1993) and when the simultaneous reflection and sensing inspire new understandings (Dark 2009).

The data

The poetic collage above is assembled from seven poetic analyses constructed in relation to two different research projects. The poetic work was not a part

of the research per se but was developed parallel to the research projects. The seven poetic analyses in the collage build on three different types of data from the two research projects. The data from the first project (project A) consist of field notes from ethnographic observations of young people's participation in educational activities as well as transcripts of two qualitative single interviews with young participants from this project. The data from the other project (project B) comprise transcripts of three qualitative focus group interviews with young participants.

The research project A from 2011–2013 is an in-depth qualitative study of 20 young people ages 15–19 from three different educational institutions and three alternative education programmes. The research was conducted over a period of 18 months, and the participants were interviewed three times. It is based on the respondents' freely volunteered informed consent, and the anonymity of the participants was secured in order to academic standards. In total, 40 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted, the duration of which varied from a half hour to one-and-a-half hours. Each round of interviews was structured around different themes, including current and past school experiences; experience of self-confidence and of the social environment; learning experiences; outlook on the future; contact with teachers, mentors, and psychologists; thoughts on dropping out; and retention. The ethnographic observations were conducted as "shadowing" the young people while they participate in their daily schedule (Czarniawska 2007) as well as observing interactions between teachers and other students. The fact that I met the participants several times allowed me to build relationships of trust with the participants, which is valuable for the opportunity to create in-depth analyses as well as for the young people's opportunity to influence my experience and interpretation of their situation.

Project B is a nationwide research project from 2013–2015 aiming at helping young people ages 18–30 into ordinary education. The data consist of qualitative interviews with 33 young people from four case projects out of the total of 12 projects across the country. The 33 interviews were conducted as focus groups with four to six participants; two focus groups for each case project divided into young women and young men. The interviews usually lasted for approximately 90 minutes and were transcribed. They are based on the respondents' freely volunteered informed consent, and the anonymity of the participants was secured in order to academic standards. The focus group interviews focussed mainly on evaluating the training and education programme they participated in, but we also had a broader perspective and included questions of the young participants' experiences with education in general, their stories of drop out, working experiences, and of "educational trust" (Görlich & Katznelson 2015), that is, how the young people develop a sense of trust through the interaction between them and the educational institutions.

Working analytically with poetic inquiry

Even though the two research projects were not set out from the beginning to include poetic work, I work in general with interview techniques that are valuable for working with poetic inquiry. I will briefly introduce these, followed by a brief introduction to the process of condensation involved in my approach to poetic analytical work.

Interviews

When conducting the interviews, single and focus groups, it is important to use interviewing techniques that allow for an affective content in the interviews. First, creating a room for reflection in which the participants and I explore their situation, experiences, and emotions is crucial. I deliberately establish a contact to the young people, which encourages them to enter this reflection room with me. This entails listening carefully, continuously asking to unfold, and using verbal recognition in the form of expressions such as “yes,” “ok,” and “ah, I understand,” all of which, in my experience, encourage the participants to continue to unfold the narrative. Second, I use a technique of paraphrasing, in which I simply repeat the last thing the young participant has said. By this, I acknowledge what he or she just said by paraphrasing it into a question, I also encourage the participant to continue. Third, I use my affective subjectivity in the interview by expressing my emotional reactions. If I feel frustration when the participant talks, I will express it by saying, for instance, “I really understand you got angry when that happened.” The purpose of this is to recognize the experience and make it legitimate for the young participant to express the emotions related to their experiences. Instead of avoiding the emotions, as in common even in qualitative academic work, I *include* them, and this produces rich empirical data for working poetically with the analyses.

Condensing the transcripts

Working with poetic inquiry, in its most simple form, is condensing field notes or interview transcripts by deleting text. More specifically, I use theoretically based analytical questions to decide what I delete and what I keep. I work through the transcript in three phases, condensing the content so that experiential and affective perspectives emerge.

In phase one, I delete and move text. I work my way through the interview deleting my questions, short factual information, generalisations, repetitions and so forth. When deciding what to keep, I look at the affective content, and through this process the condensation contributes slowly to the construction of an affective and evocative text, formed by the words of the young

participants. Furthermore, I also move text and build verses of experiences of similar kind or that belong to same period of time. In the second phase, I condensate these verses further, focussing on the affective content to enable the construction of evocative and polyvocal poetic analyses. Overall, I strive at the appearing of interactions of meanings among categories, negotiations, and subject positions to analyse what the complexity of structural, institutional, and discursive terms and conditions do to the young people, and how the young people interact with these (Görlich 2016b). In phase three, I read and interpret the poetic analyses with theoretical concepts. This allows me to read across the poetic analyses and explore phenomena that emerge from these readings. It is not within the scope of this article to go further into this phase, but interested readers might find elaborate examples of this in a forthcoming article in which I explore processes of subjectification by using poetic inquiry (Görlich forthcoming).

Getting in touch: the value of poetic inquiry

The poetic work in this article has been presented as a poetic collage from two different research projects. As it appears, research projects A and B are different in many respects: size, geography, age of the participants, and the research design. However, common to both are more general issues of education, the focus on education as a solution to youth unemployment, past experiences, and the struggles with educational completion of the young participants. Hence, the seven poetic analyses in the poetic collage share similar empirical content, and the collage strengthens the analysis' evoking and polyvocal ability. This is seen in the way the various voices appear in the collage. The young participant's voices emerge forcefully because they sound alike and yet at the same time are different across the empirical material. The perspectives turn and shift, evoking the senses and reflection. The researcher's voice is strongly present in the beginning of the poetic collage, setting the scene affectively, so to speak. Lastly, the theory voice is allowed to unfold and show the depth of subjectification (Butler 1990; Davies 2006). This unfolding is present as variation in the young people's positioning (Davies & Harré 1990), in their submission and mastering (Davies 2006), and in the various ways of distance (Görlich forthcoming).

I have chosen not to present the poetic analyses for the young participants, as I consider them analytical texts and to be evaluated and validated in an academic context. I do find it interesting to include a layer in the analyses in which the young participants are invited to reflect on the poetic work, but this I would consider a methodological tool, not a validating one. In this form of qualitative work, it is accepted that subjective interpretations are involved in research (Davies 2000; Richardson 1997), and bodily experiences are not seen as a "contamination" of scientific processes but rather as a form

of evidence for being present in the empirical period. There is no “great interpreter” (Krøjer & Hølge-Hazelton 2008, p. 29); instead, the poetic text is validated as open and open-ended contributions, which, by virtue of its evocative content, allow emotions to be important for understanding (Richardson 1997). Validation is also found in the researchers’ ability to create dialogue among participant, researcher, and reader (Richardson 1997; Dark 2009). I find that poetic inquiry has a great potential to be used more extensively as a qualitative research method within psychology, and in the social sciences in general, as a way of capturing subjective and affective aspects of human life.

Notes on contributor

Anne Görlich is a PhD, Assistant Professor and trained psychotherapist. She works at the Centre for Youth Research at Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark.

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